



## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

Films drawing on Middle Eastern or Arabian tropes and characters have been a recurrent aspect of Euro-American cinema since the silent era. Many of these early productions feature heroes marked as both Western and white, such as Rudolph Valentino's *The Sheik* (1921). There is, however, a counter-tradition of protagonists who, though usually played by actors of European descent, are explicitly portrayed as 'Other' to Euro-American audiences. Yet these characters exhibit few of the problematic traits this label routinely confers. Whether derived from folklore, such as Sinbad, or history, notably Saladin, these figures are often conflated with a wider cycle of 'Arabian Nights' fantasies that highlight 'exotic' spectacle and are generally regarded as either escapist entertainment of negligible importance or pernicious examples of 'brownface' and/or 'whitewashing'. This book makes the argument that Euro-American screen depictions of Sinbad, the Thief of Bagdad, and other Arab-identified heroes are more complex and nuanced than such limited readings allow. This is especially the case in terms of the multitudinous, ever-shifting concepts and assumptions that inform their Muslim identity as Western filmmakers create it.<sup>1</sup> My concern is not so much the accuracy of this conferred status,

<sup>1</sup>In fact, the majority of the global Muslim population are Indian, Pakistani, Indonesian, Malaysian, or Bangladeshi. Yet Euro-American cinema and media discourse in general have made the terms 'Arab' and 'Muslim' virtually synonymous (cf. Shaheen 4; Gottschalk and Greenberg 5).

but the extent to and manner in which it imbues their overall representation that is notably at odds with the majority of screen Muslims who are often rendered as bystanders, victims, or antagonists. I contend that these characters, however Westernized, possess a cultural significance which cannot be fully appreciated by Euro-American audiences—from whatever interpretive vantage point—without reference to their distinction as Muslim heroes and the associated implications and resonances of an Islamicized protagonist.

At the risk of perpetuating Euro-American generalizations that surround Islam, the latter is, at the very least, a complex, evolving network of multi-faceted historical, geopolitical, cultural, and religious phenomena which have been simplified, essentialized, and distorted in much Western discourse. The post-9/11 tendency to (re)cast Islam as a retrograde, alien ideology that threatens liberal democracies—which has roots in Medieval European attitudes—shows little sign of abating (cf. Garcia 28; Dajani and Michelmore 55; Morgan and Poynting 2). The Euro-American media emphasis on exceptional negative stereotyping and open hostility renders Islam in heavily ideologized, propagandized, and fictionalized terms that offer minimal insight or analysis (cf. Said 1997: xlviii, lxx; Dajani and Michelmore 53–4). I also draw on theories of Orientalism, popularized by Edward Said's seminal, if contested, 1978 study.<sup>2</sup> Said argues that Europe and America<sup>3</sup> created a schismatic image of the 'Orient' as Other, contrasted and opposed to the Occidental world (2019: 1–2). 'Orient' in this context refers to a perceived 'geographical, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic unit', as constructed and reproduced by Western countries over the course of centuries (2019: 50, 166, 201). Where Westerners are 'rational, peaceful, liberal, logical', what Said terms Arab-Orientals 'are none of these things' (2019: 49) and, it seems, incapable of becoming so. In this

<sup>2</sup>For example, Humberto Garcia criticizes Said for the anachronistic application of an East-West binary to the early modern period (xi), while Daniel Martin Varisco and Joshua David Bellin note the objection to Said's implication that Orientalist fantasy transcends history, seemingly impervious to individual, cultural, or geopolitical circumstances (Varisco 2007: 252; Bellin 75). Nickolas Haydock endorses Said's 'mutual implication of imperialism and representation' yet observes that the latter's scholarly credentials 'have been devastatingly questioned by many' (2008: 127n.13). My own small contribution is to query Said's citation of Western governments as 'stabilizing influences' (2019: 201), in terms of Orientalism or any other field.

<sup>3</sup>For the purposes of this book, the terms America and American refer to the United States, unless otherwise stated.

scenario, only a Westerner can be entrusted to manage the Orient and to know its totality (2019: 256). Thus, the Orient serves as both a validation of colonial power, affiliated with knowledge, and an object of self-contemplation (cf. Said 2019: 1, 27, 32; Said 1997: xlix), while denying the colonized any right or even ability of self-representation (cf. Said 2019: 32; Varisco 2007: 40, 290).

Furthermore, Europeans have repeatedly remoulded their identity and shored up a sense of self via ongoing interaction with and reference to non-Europeans (cf. P. O'Brien 16; Wade 38). This process remains ongoing and new iterations of Orientalism, such as neo-Orientalism (Asef Bayat) and fractal Orientalism (Ghassan Moussawi), address the further complexities of continued colonialism. Islam in particular became a reference point, often framed in adverse terms, for the gradual construction and assertion of European identity (cf. Jonker and Thobani 4). The Muslim has been systematically and consistently Othered in religious, ethnic, and racial terms and consequently proved fundamental to shaping the Western worldview, through the Reformation to the globalization era (cf. Akbari 1; Blanks and Frassetto 2, 3; Jonker and Thobani 2).<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, there has been considerable, if often unacknowledged, cultural similarity, exchange, and assimilation (cf. Blanks and Frassetto 4; Morey and Yaqin, 207). In the American context, for instance, it is argued that Arab-Islamic figures were appropriated by and woven into the fabric of American culture and collective consciousness during the nineteenth century, exerting an influence on the national and personal imaginary (cf. Friedlander 363–4; Berman x–xi).

While this book is not intended as a study of Islam, I provide background material on this religious-ideological-political-sociocultural phenomenon to anchor my arguments based around a series of film case studies. My approach contextualizes characters and performers on various levels—historical, economic, industrial, and racial—while examining their reception in terms of media response. Primary research sources include film-related journals such as *Variety*, *Boxoffice*, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, and *American Cinematographer*, alongside more mainstream outlets, to underpin my discussion of the films' contemporary contexts, in terms of both production and release. One of my methodological tools is textual

<sup>4</sup>The situation is of course more complicated than this. For instance, Akbar S. Ahmed states that hostile attitudes to Muslim men exist in India and even Pakistan, accompanied by a comparable homogenizing essentialism (xvi).

analysis, and this book offers an in-depth study of a wide range of films, many of which have not been examined previously in detail, especially in terms of their Islamic content. I focus in part on the status of the protagonists in regard to narrative function and dialogue and visual factors, such as costume, make-up, lighting, and framing. While relatively few of these films are widely considered to be major contributions to cinema culture and history, my analysis of particular roles and titles explores how Muslim heroes have been deployed on the Western screen by a white, Christian-dominated industry across numerous eras.

If it is tempting to think of this relationship in terms of a symbiotic interplay between West and East, Christian and Muslim, this approach must be recognized as both problematic and inappropriate since Muslims were largely absent from the case studies examined in this book. As noted, the history of Euro-American Muslim representation is concerned largely with self-identification and definition, rather than producing knowledge of the Islamic world.<sup>5</sup> Writing in 1997, Said stated that Western culture and discourse had little place to contemplate, let alone articulate or portray Islam in a sympathetic fashion (6). I argue that mainstream American and European cinema has provided such a space, one where portrayals of Muslims can be sensitive to cultural nuance and religious detail. These depictions are often both conceived and received through an investigative lens anchored in Orientalist framing, yet their modes of representation—historical, romantic, or fantastic—may enable them to transcend its parameters and confines. Most of the Euro-American world, if not entirely ignorant of Islam, will only ‘know’ it from a narrow, incomplete, and biased interpretive viewpoint. Within this context, it is important to examine how and speculate on why some filmmakers depict Muslim figures as heroic protagonists and the ways in which audiences may understand them. In the following section I will outline Euro-American perceptions and representations of Islam prior to the cinematic age. I then provide an overview of the broader depiction of Muslims in film, a definition of the term ‘hero’, and the criteria that signify ‘Muslim’ for these figures.

The term ‘Islam’ may be translated, or transliterated, as surrender or submission, specifically to God’s will (cf. Gregorian 6). A monotheistic Abrahamic faith originating in the Middle East, neither monolithic nor wholly defined by its religious aspect, Islam can be characterized as a

<sup>5</sup> As with Sir Richard Burton and his ‘studies’ of Muslim men’s sexualities during the nineteenth century.

multiethnic, highly influential civilization built and advanced by Muslims (cf. P. O'Brien 12, 13), which also refracts the great diversity of Muslim-majority countries and the retention of national individuality (cf. Varisco 2005: 1, 8; Khattak 9; Jung 1). By and large, Euro-American cultures have taken an essentialist, reductive approach to Islam that ignores national, political, sectarian, or ethnic affiliations, regarding it as an aggressive competitor, not least in military terms, and as a challenge to Christianity (cf. Said 1997: 4–5).<sup>6</sup> A Muslim may be defined as one who submits to God (cf. Gregorian 6), though some maintain that this is a relatively modern term, little used before the second half of the twentieth century (cf. Berger 20).<sup>7</sup> The Qur'an<sup>8</sup> can be characterized as a collection of discourses delivered by the Prophet Muhammad during the last two decades of his life. It consists mainly of short passages of religious or ecumenical teaching, arguments against opponents, commentaries on current events, and rulings on social and legal matters, all taken as the word of God, as dictated to the Prophet via the angel Gabriel (cf. Gibb 3).

From the Middle Ages into the early Renaissance, Christian commentators depicted Islam, in Said's phrase, as 'a demonic religion of apostasy, blasphemy, and obscurity' (1997: 5). Suzanne Conklin Akbari notes how medieval literary cultures both rejected Islam and sought to integrate aspects of it, citing Dante's vision of paradise as drawing on the *Mi'raj*, which recounts Muhammad's night journey to Heaven and Hell (5, 262; cf. Khattak 50; Southern 55).<sup>9</sup> Islam was both dangerous and alluring, officially an unassimilable anathema yet also enculturated, however

<sup>6</sup>David Tyrer argues that Muslim identities disrupt and implicitly challenge Western distinctions and categories relating to race, religion, and secularism, resisting Eurocentric classification (167, 168). Furthermore, specific historical geopolitical factors are often sidelined in Western discourse on Islam, as with the late 1960s rise of militant piety, in countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, and later Iran, as a reaction against secular modernity and the perceived failures of socialism and Pan-Arabism (cf. Elgamri xi; McAlister 200).

<sup>7</sup>Imam Dr. Abduljalil Sajid defines Muslims as an ethno-religious group who in Euro-American discourse are often constructed or construed as a distinct race (1–2).

<sup>8</sup>The title of this sacred text translates literally as 'recitation'.

<sup>9</sup>S.A. Nigosian stresses that the link can only be assumed rather than proven (81, 102, 128), while Annemarie Schimmel asserts that this possible influence 'cannot be excluded' as the sources were well known in the medieval Mediterranean world (219; cf. Shalem 3). Karla Mallette cites Miguel Asín Palacios' monograph *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia/Muslim Eschatology in the Divine Comedy* (1919) as initiating this debate, while stating that the author's argument lacks 'a plausible means of transmission of Islamic notions of the afterlife to Dante' (190).

superficially, on various levels (cf. Akbari 5; Shohat and Stam 58). Akbari argues that the loaded term 'Saracen', frequently though not exclusively applied to Muslims during the medieval era, manifested in European literature and cultural production as dark, malformed, and irredeemable (cf. Blanks and Frassetto 3), yet also as white, well-proportioned, and assimilable (Akbari 156). While the white European stood as the norm in medieval discourses of masculinized bodily diversity, some Saracens came close to matching him (160). For example, Baligant, in the French epic poem *La chanson de Roland/The Song of Roland* (c.1040–1115), has an attractive, European-looking body (163). Thus, the supposed gulf between Christian and Muslim could be problematized and implicitly challenged within certain European cultural contexts.

The first significant Muslim presence in Europe remains a source of contention. While the eighth century has been cited (cf. Obaid 12), others maintain there was minimal Western awareness of Islam until the sixteenth century, linked with the expanding Ottoman Empire (cf. Khattak 7–8).<sup>10</sup> This era also marked a growing European interest in Islamic culture, manifested in forms such as design, language, and theatre (cf. Khattak 50). Hammood Khalid Obaid cites *The Battle of Alcazar* (1589), by George Peele, as the first English play to feature a Moor in a major role, followed by William Percy's *Mahomet and His Heaven* (1601) (x). Obaid argues that both works are topical constructions refracting contemporary local and national issues and events; neither can be taken as representing existing knowledge of the Muslim Other (x). The Digby *Mary Magdalene* is a late fifteenth-/early sixteenth-century play, where the redeemed Mary converts pagans to Christianity (cf. Wade 22, 23). As Erik Wade notes, the term 'Muslim' is not used, yet the heathens invoke Muhammad, and their association with idolatry and carnality refracts Christian propaganda of the era (31, 22–3, 30, 32–3). Islamic characters and motifs featured frequently on the Elizabethan stage (Obaid 2), just as Protestant Queen Elizabeth I established relations with Muslim Barbary states, especially Morocco, both parties recognizing a common enemy in Catholic Spain (137; cf. Hawting 74).<sup>11</sup> While Islam was favourably regarded, in part at least, by

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Jotischky argues that for most Europeans, Muslims were a distant reality before the twelfth century, with rare exceptions such as the Iberian Peninsula (26; see Chap. 4). Furthermore, Islam as a religion was barely understood in the West (26).

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth I also made successful overtures to the Ottoman emperor Murad III, believing the latter to rule the only military power capable of maintaining the balance of control in favour of anti-Spanish factions (cf. Inalcik 330; Ansari 26).

Enlightenment figures such as Voltaire, by the late nineteenth century much of the Muslim world had been colonized (cf. Khattak 133). In this context, many Western stereotypes developed to be employed and perpetuated more or less unconstrained and unchallenged, even within Muslim countries (cf. Khattak 133).<sup>12</sup> Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst identifies the 1857 Indian rebellion as the point when the hugely diverse Muslim communities came to be defined by the British ruling elite as homogenized, racialized, minoritized<sup>13</sup> religious actors, and as subjects of empire who must submit to imperial power (3, 7, 8, 49–50, 132). Furthermore, they were regarded as possessing inherent, intractable, yet transmittable traits that included the potential for jihad, a theological, textual, and legal category here reduced to a violent religious fundamentalism (7, 12).<sup>14</sup>

Events from the 1970s, including oil disputes, the Iranian Revolution, and the American hostage crisis,<sup>15</sup> consolidated and calcified the predominant Western view of Islam as being a fixed set of premodern attitudes and beliefs<sup>16</sup> unaffected by the multiplicity of contextual factors in play since its foundation in the seventh century (cf. Said 1997: 1, 36; Dajani and Michelmore 57–60; Ansari 389; Elgamri xi; Mamdani 18; Gottschalk and Greenberg 124). This attitude has been encapsulated as a modern expression of medieval perceptions that advances Western political, military, and industrial interests (cf. Dajani and Michelmore 55; Elgamri 5; Arjana and Fox 3). Karen F. Dajani and Christina Michelmore address the idea of a manufactured ‘Green Peril’,<sup>17</sup> in the form of a threatening Islamic fundamentalism (55). The latter replaced the Soviet Red Peril at the behest of the American foreign-military policy establishment, as an effective means

<sup>12</sup> Addressing the British context, Humayun Ansari identifies a new sense of cultural superiority emerging in the early nineteenth century; a combination of colonialism, stereotyping, and technological advantage fed a prejudice towards non-white and/or non-Christian peoples as mental and moral inferiors (59–60).

<sup>13</sup> Defined by Morgenstein Fuerst as ‘the systematic process by which a ruling elite denies one group access to power through local, national or [...] imperial politics’ (50).

<sup>14</sup> Jihad may be broadly defined as a struggle or striving, external and internal, to achieve a praiseworthy goal in line with Divine precept.

<sup>15</sup> Melani McAlister argues that these events led to Islam becoming the major signifier of ‘the imagined geography’ of the Middle East, rather than oil wealth, Arabs, or Christian Holy Lands (200). The dominant American perspective reconfigured this political-religious phenomenon into ‘the essential character of an entire region’ (200).

<sup>16</sup> Often assumed to be also antimodern (cf. Mamdani 18).

<sup>17</sup> A term attributed to Jules Régis Debray (cf. Mamdani 21), a French journalist and academic.

of mobilizing popular support for defence expenditure and American interventionism (55). Mahmood Mamdani notes how this menace is supposedly even more fearsome than the USSR as it lacks 'rational self-restraint' (21), deriving from fanaticism rather than calculated geopolitical powerplay.<sup>18</sup> Khambiz GhaneaBassiri argues that, in times of crisis, national unity may be sustained and strengthened 'by ascribing undesirable values to religious out-groups', Muslims being an obvious and familiar target (70).<sup>19</sup> These attitudes and assumptions have been refracted, in various forms and to varying degrees, in Euro-American film production.

### SCREENING MUSLIMS

Case studies aside, space does not allow for more than a partial survey of Euro-American films that feature Muslim settings and characters. I will confine myself here to examples from the late silent era, when cinema was well established as an industrial and cultural entity, then discuss some later titles before engaging with debates over films produced from the 1980s onwards. With these provisos in mind, it can nevertheless be stated that the history of Muslim screen representation is marked by an enduring ambivalence, whatever the period or location. For instance, the German film *Der müde Tod/Destiny* (1921), partly set in 'the city of the faithful'<sup>20</sup> during 'The Holy Month of Ramadan',<sup>21</sup> depicts the muezzin call to prayer and an imam<sup>22</sup> with his Qur'an. Other Muslims, however, are shown as blade-wielding fanatics who thirst for infidel blood. The caliph likens the Christian in love with the ruler's sister to 'a mangy dog' and has

<sup>18</sup> Mamdani states that any actual peril from this source is a direct legacy of the American attempt in the mid-1980s 'to harness extreme versions of political Islam in the struggle against the Soviet Union' (119). Groups trained and sponsored by the CIA acquired three key operative tools: terror tactics, holy war as political ideology, and transnational recruitment (163). The long-term effects of this policy are vividly illustrated in the Franco-Mauritanian film *Timbuktu* (2014), where a multinational jihadist force delivers strictures via loudhailer yet exhibits little grasp of Islam—the troops are more interested in European soccer teams—and is largely concerned with misogynist subjugation.

<sup>19</sup> GhaneaBassiri also claims that the United States in particular has employed this strategy as a pattern of governance 'that has often obfuscated the political and economic sources of the crisis to the benefit of the state' (70).

<sup>20</sup> Mecca? Bagdad?

<sup>21</sup> The annual commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's first revelation.

<sup>22</sup> An Islamic leadership role that is centred on the local mosque while also extending to the wider community.



him buried up to his neck. A more nuanced approach is found in *Les contes de mille et une nuits/The Tales of a Thousand and One Nights* (1921), a French production with a cast and crew consisting largely of Russian émigrés.<sup>23</sup> The Muslim heroine, a shipwrecked princess, is shown at prayer, her bowed head touching the sand. Stranded in a brutish pagan land, where belief in Islam is a capital crime, the princess is saved by the king's son, who was secretly converted to the faith by the vizier who raised him. This depiction of Islam allows for miracles, or at least divine intervention, as when a written message descends from heaven, decreeing ill-fortune for the king and his people if the prince is harmed. Having scorned this divine warning, the entire court is turned to stone. The prince's climactic rescue of the princess is aided by heavenly fire which appears at his invocation. Evoking a Euro-American literary trope of persecuted Christian lovers (e.g., *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1834; *Quo Vadis*, 1896),<sup>24</sup> *The Tales of a Thousand and One Nights* appears to depict Islam as the One True Faith, and thereby displacing Christianity, though any potential controversy is mediated by the explicitly fantastical setting. On a more personal level, themes of persecution and exile would have held especial resonance for Russian nationals who had recently fled the new communist regime.

*Das Wachsfigurenkabinett/Waxworks* (1924) includes an episode based around the Bagdad caliph Haroun al Raschid. As played by Emil Jannings, a major German film star, he is a semi-comic figure, short and overweight, with his bulk emphasized by a vast bulbous turban. A polygamist with hundreds of wives, he prioritizes sexual exploits, pursuing a baker's wife. The put-upon baker finds sanctuary seated within the arc of an Islamic crescent on a domed rooftop. Whatever the significance of this image, religious or otherwise, the resolution highlights Haroun's dubious patronage rather than Muslim values. The German animated film *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed/The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) has been cited for its respectful treatment of Islam (cf. Shaheen 46). The film exhibits such Muslim-inflected tropes as a banner bearing a crescent moon and a star, along with calls to prayer from minarets. However, a caliph's oath, 'By the beard of the Prophet', is problematic, suggesting a trivialization, or ignorance, of the religious context. Prince Achmed's invocation of Allah's grace is linked with female capitulation to patriarchal control, often

<sup>23</sup>The edition under review is an abridgement prepared for home viewing, entitled *The Arabian Nights*. The original version is believed lost.

<sup>24</sup>Both books had been adapted into films several times by the early 1920s.

cited in Euro-American discourse as a prime example of Muslim subjugation. The penultimate shot of the film, in its surviving version, is a long view of four muezzins calling from towers, as the sun rises in the distance, the men raising their arms then bowing (Fig. 1.1). This image is associated with the restoration of normalcy and order, which could be read as an endorsement of Islam. The final shot, framing Achmed with his family and fiancée, may be interpreted as affirming this perspective, yet the adventures depicted manifest little sense of an Islamic milieu.

The Hollywood-produced *The Desert Song* (1929) is a white saviour narrative that depicts Muslims and their religion as fundamentally alien to the West, or at least France, birthplace of the masked hero. The latter serves as the leader of Moroccan Riffs, without their suspecting his true identity. This implies an inherent superiority over a people who, it seems, cannot comprehend the basic Western virtues, let alone embrace them. Conversely, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1944), one of Universal's series of Arabian Nights spectacles (see Chap. 2), offers a clear wartime



Fig. 1.1 *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926)

parallel: better to die resisting tyranny than face a living death under the foot of an oppressor. At the end, the Mongol flag emblemizing the occupation of Bagdad is replaced by a green flag bearing Arabic script and a crescent moon. Whatever the intentions of the filmmakers, this imagery both invokes Islam and links it with deliverance and freedom. Later American examples refract a conservative retrenchment whereby Islam is casually trivialized, if not openly condemned. *The Desert Hawk* (1950), set in ancient Persia, associates the Muslim faith with sexually available young women, described as the 'fairest flowers of Islam'. The eponymous hero invokes the Qur'an and Allah to protest his romantic and marital fidelity, yet at this point he is posing as the film's archvillain, whose own appeals to Islamic ideals are blatantly bogus. Counterexamples to this approach are discussed in the case study chapters.

One of the more notable depictions of a historical Muslim protagonist is *Lion of the Desert* (1980), the second and last feature film directed by Moustapha Akkad, who made the birth-of-Islam epic *Al-Risalah/The Message* (1976, see Chap. 6). Like its predecessor, *Lion of the Desert* was Libyan financed, yet the production drew heavily on Euro-American personnel both sides of the camera. Hollywood actor Anthony Quinn plays Omar Mukhtar, a Libyan Bedouin, who from 1911 to 1931 led the resistance against occupying Italian forces. Associated from his first scene with Islam, the Qur'an, and education, Mukhtar is calm and understanding, finishing class early so that his pupils may watch street entertainers. His insistence on making one final point<sup>25</sup> underlines the conviction and determination that mark both his religious observance and his abilities as a military leader. Walking through the burnt-out ruins of his home village, Mukhtar questions his decisions while holding a singed Qur'anic tablet, which emblemizes both the dangers the rebels face on a daily basis and the values which make these risks and sacrifices worthwhile. It is notable that the politically savvy Mukhtar looks beyond Islam to further his cause, seeking international recognition of the struggle for freedom. He refuses to be lectured on Islamic doctrine by a condescending Italian bureaucrat and knows that the honourable peace sought by his compatriots is impossible under Fascist colonialism. Concerned with nation, ethnicity, and tribe, Mukhtar is defined and represented largely through his religious identity. A scene where he addresses his men in a cave evokes the Prophet

<sup>25</sup>The importance of balance in all things, illustrated by the spectacles poised on Mukhtar's finger.

Muhammad's similar refuge during the journey from Mecca to Medina (see Chap. 6). Having been captured, his ritual prayer is witnessed by a 'decent' Italian officer who is well aware of his own side's moral and spiritual bankruptcy. Mukhtar's sentence of death is calmly received as a return to God and he is framed on the gallows, Qur'an in hand for a final reading. A medium close-up emphasizes not so much the rope around his neck as a last prayer, Mukhtar content to die at the hands of his enemies in the service of a just cause.

The science-fiction film *Pitch Black* (2000) is unusual for its genre in featuring a major character explicitly identified as a Muslim. Black actor Keith David plays Imam,<sup>26</sup> one of several spacecraft passengers who crash land on a desert planet only to find their lives in further peril. Turbaned, bearded, and robed, Imam is dismissed by the film's antihero, Riddick (Vin Diesel), as 'some hoodoo holy man'.<sup>27</sup> Leading his young followers in prayer, Imam is on *hajj* or pilgrimage. He exhibits both optimism and faith, finding signs from Allah where Riddick sees only self-interest and brute survival. The location of water is treated as a cause for celebration. Prayer rugs and beads have positive connotations, in contrast to their depiction in many American films.<sup>28</sup> Imam states that *hajj* refers to self-knowledge as well as knowledge of Allah. In this sense, he and his fellow survivors are now on the same *hajj*, whatever their religious beliefs or lack thereof. Imam serves as a trusted member of the group, in contrast to fugitive convict Riddick, and in some ways is treated as just another person trying to make the best of a bad situation. He speculates that the creatures which threaten them operate largely by sound and rightly cautions his fellow humans that the phase of darkness referenced in the film's title will be long lasting. While it would be a stretch to argue that Imam's Muslim faith facilitates the redemption of Riddick, he does at least guide the latter towards alternative ways of thinking which contribute to both men's deliverance. In the sequel, *The Chronicles of Riddick* (2004), Imam is integrated into both the public and domestic space, as community leader and family man. Faced with alien invasion, he recruits Riddick's help and draws enemy troops away from his wife and daughter. Devout in the face of

<sup>26</sup>The character is not otherwise named. Some coverage refers to him as Abu al-Walid, though this name does not appear on the credits for this film or its sequel.

<sup>27</sup>Hoodoo may refer to traditions of Black American spirituality, esoteric knowledge, or folk magic, though the film does not pursue this angle.

<sup>28</sup>See for instance *Executive Decision* (1996), discussed below.

death, he submits to Allah's will rather than be transformed, or converted, to the dark religion of the Necromongers.<sup>29</sup> Imam's unshakeable faith helps to ensure the survival of his family and spurs Riddick's fight back against the literally soul-stealing villain.

Rubina Ramji argues that cinematic Islam continues to refract and endorse longstanding Euro-American perceptions that rarely stray from the homogenous, monolithic, and essentialized (1). At best Islam is mysterious and exotic; at (usual) worst it is violent, confrontational, and barbaric (2, 1). Old stereotypes of lustful, desert-dwelling bearded sheiks on camels have simply been replaced or supplemented by new stereotypes—hijackers, kidnappers, and terrorists (2). Waleed F. Mahdi identifies three distinct processes by which Hollywood has downgraded, or degraded, Arabs and Muslims from human to nonhuman/animal status: denigration, naturalization, and alienation (148). While this approach may appear overly schematic, not to say extreme, all three factors can be seen in play across a variety of American films, with a consistency evocative of political and ideological disempowerment (cf. Mingant 178). Similarly, Nolwenn Mingant identifies a longstanding Hollywood practice whereby Middle Eastern characters are denied proper voice and thereby stripped of their humanity, whether in terms of fractured English and/or pleading tones (*Three Kings*, 1999; *The Hurt Locker*, 2008), or muteness (*The Hurt Locker*), coupled with bodies reduced to silhouettes to achieve an audiovisual blankness (176, 178, 179).<sup>30</sup>

In *Three Kings*, set during the First Gulf War, the American hero has his wounded arm treated by Muslim rebels to the sound of Muslim prayer, yet exhibits scant regard for either their cause or their religion. His

<sup>29</sup> The film plays on the theme of renouncing religious faith in the name of survival.

<sup>30</sup> In a similar ploy, Muslims are rendered as mostly distant figures who barely impinge on a narrative or diegesis concerned with Euro-American protagonists. See for example *Jarhead* (2005), *A Mighty Heart* (2007), and *Kajaki/Kilo Two Bravo* (2014). Episode six of *Generation Kill* (2008) gives screen-time to a young Iraqi woman, fluent in English, who questions the American military presence, the need for permission to travel in her own country, and the reasons for bombing Bagdad, her native city. Though a rare shift in focus from the central marine battalion, this scene can be read as tokenistic and didactic, not least when the woman declares that the American operation is an oil-based war of aggression, not liberation. *Argo* (2012) depicts the civilians of revolutionary Iran as either a threatening mob or isolated individuals, such as a housekeeper loyal to her Canadian employers; American culpability for this upheaval is acknowledged then sidelined. In *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016), an Afghan fixer refuses to work with an American journalist who puts both their lives at risk, yet returns to her side as the narrative requires, negating his previous agency.

subsequent enlightenment and redemption are firmly entrenched in the white saviour tradition. *The Hurt Locker*, set largely in Bagdad, does not entirely silence the locals, though Arabic dialogue is untranslated. An Iraqi professor and soldier speak fluent English in polite fashion, while the latter's bafflement with the protagonist's humour and demeanour is shared by his American colleagues. An interpreter who seeks the protagonist's help to save an involuntary suicide bomber is treated dismissively as a nuisance rather than an asset. Physically the locals serve largely as background colour and atmosphere.

Ramji cites Reagan-era films such as *Iron Eagle* (1986) and *The Delta Force* (1986) to evidence her assertion that the Hollywood narrative of Islamic threat 'has become a constant imagination of impending terrorism' (3). Both films explicitly reference the recent Iran hostage crisis that arguably facilitated the President's first election victory.<sup>31</sup> In *Iron Eagle*, the minaret and muezzin are visually linked with machine gun emplacements and armoured vehicles, as the call to prayer dominates the soundtrack. Yet any threat to the United States is nullified by an American teenager who singlehandedly beats the aerial might of a (fictional) Middle Eastern country. *The Delta Force* focuses on the terrorist hijacking<sup>32</sup> of an airplane filled largely with American tourists. The leader<sup>33</sup> is framed in close-up as he prays in Arabic, connoting a man of faith, yet is then shown beating female flight attendants with his gun. Vocally anti-American and anti-Zionist,<sup>34</sup> the terrorists are equated with Nazis as they identify and segregate Jewish passengers, then torture and murder an American serviceman. Needless to say, the hijack is foiled by the eponymous heroes,<sup>35</sup> with the terrorist leader flambéed into oblivion rather than paradise by Reaganite action hero Chuck Norris.

The James Bond series, regarded as an Anglo-American enterprise, did not follow this route. *The Living Daylights* (1987), references ongoing

<sup>31</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini is a pervasive presence throughout *The Delta Force*, in terms of images and verbal references. See also *Argo*.

<sup>32</sup> The film prevaricates over the hijackers' national origin, hinted to be either Palestinian or Lebanese.

<sup>33</sup> Played by white American actor Robert Forster, who wears brownface make-up and speaks in accented English.

<sup>34</sup> Here treated as synonymous with antisemitic.

<sup>35</sup> Based on a United States Army elite special operations force involved in counterterrorism. The film evokes the 1976 Israel Defense Forces raid on Entebbe airport, in Uganda, where Jewish hostages were held by Palestinian and West German hijackers.

American-Soviet antagonism, focused on the latter's invasion of Afghanistan and American support for rebel mujahideen forces. Bond (Timothy Dalton) forms an alliance with Kamran Shah (Art Malik), a local leader. Shah's first appearance plays on negative Muslim stereotypes: he is abused in a Russian jail, his hands clutching the cell bars as he pleads for mercy in an 'ethnic' accent, while the jailer mockingly invokes Allah. Liberated by Bond, Shah reappears elegantly dressed and now speaking in a refined 'regular' British-Asian accent.<sup>36</sup> Unwilling to serve as Bond's lackey, Shah sets conditions for a joint mission that will benefit them both. In visual terms, he dominates the frame as much as Bond does during these scenes and is highlighted in imposing low-angle close shots as he negotiates with 007. Shah also takes care of his forces, risking his life to save an injured man from the advancing Russians. It is notable that the film does not openly depict Shah as a Muslim, focusing rather on the character's Anglicized traits—such as an Oxford education—and status as a Bond confederate. *The Living Daylights* sidesteps more problematic aspects of mujahideen activities. *Rambo III* (1988), which highlights the Cold War context, also presents them as heroic freedom fighters against the occupying Soviet troops. While Rambo's mission—to rescue an old army friend—is ostensibly personal, rebel leader Masoud regards the conflict as a holy war. After a Soviet massacre, Rambo declares that this is now his war and effectively becomes a mujahideen. Offered Allah's blessings by Masoud and branded a terrorist by the Soviet commander, Rambo triumphs as part of a collective endeavour that evokes, however spuriously, an Islamic identity.

*Navy Seals* (1990) casts its shadowy Muslim antagonists as deceivers, thieves, and murderers. The leader articulates his reasons for hating Americans—condemned as invaders, hypocrites, and killers—and justifies his own actions as retaliatory. This perspective is, however, given little weight and his statements are contradicted by a female journalist, whose half-Lebanese parentage invests her with both neutrality and authority. These terrorists despise the West and care nothing for Islam, treating Muslim pilgrims as hostages and human shields. The journalist records a television feature on 'True Islam', which cites the religion in terms of tolerance, equality, justice, antiterrorism, and kinship to Christianity and

<sup>36</sup> Malik is Pakistani-English.



Judaism. While this counter to negative Muslim stereotypes is tokenistic,<sup>37</sup> and distanced from the viewer via the television framing, it is unusual for an American film of this era.

*True Lies* (1994) has no interest in depicting such niceties, pitting American secret agent Harry Tasker (Arnold Schwarzenegger) against terrorist Salim Abu Aziz. The latter is played by Art Malik, who portrayed the heroic mujahideen leader in *The Living Daylights*. Aziz, by contrast, leads the Crimson Jihad, a name which invokes Western notions of bloody fundamentalist violence committed in the name of Islam. Aziz is introduced undercover in a Washington DC art gallery. Having infiltrated the United States capital, if not yet the Capitol, he reveals his base nature by verbally and physically abusing a female cohort who displeases him. Though not unhandsome by Western aesthetic standards, Aziz is framed in harsh, horizontal shadows that mark and break up his face, stressing his sinister, Othered essence. Aziz is known as Sand Spider, a less than human status conveyed further through a series of images that highlight his wild fanatic stare, as observed by Tasker on a monitor.<sup>38</sup> Aziz is not depicted as an overt sexual threat to Western women, yet his outrages are often gendered, as when he uses a woman as a human shield, holds Tasker's wife at knifepoint, and kidnaps his teenage daughter. The danger posed by Aziz is diminished through ridicule, such as camera batteries failing as he records his threat to the American people, and a groin trauma that confirms his ultimate impotence in the face of American resilience, both national and familial.

*Executive Decision* (1996), another hijacking drama, associates the Qur'an, prayer beads, and by extension Islam with terrorist atrocities.<sup>39</sup> Aside from reworking *The Delta Force*, a decade on, the film ups the ante by placing plans for an attack on America inside the Holy Book.<sup>40</sup> None of which is countered by the leader's chief henchman belatedly turning

<sup>37</sup> Images of Muslims at prayer and digs at CIA intransigence are unlikely to have gained much traction at the time, especially in the film's country of origin.

<sup>38</sup> Once again, this brutal terrorist leader condemns Western nations, and America in particular, as killers of women and children, and as cowardly bombers of cities. The hypocrisy—and illegitimacy—of this claim has already been established, not least in the image of Aziz resting his hands on a stolen nuclear weapon. Similar strategies of representation continue to be employed in American films, such as the recent *Rogue Warfare* trilogy (2019, 2019, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> Images of Muslim men at prayer are associated solely with acts of violence.

<sup>40</sup> After public complaints of anti-Islamism, most home video and television versions of the film were reedited to remove perceived offensive content.



against him and claiming their mission has nothing to do with Islam or the will of Allah. *Air Force One* (1997) repeatedly invokes Iraq and Saddam Hussain as a clear and present danger to the United States, yet the villains here are Russian and Kazakhstani ultranationalists. While Kazakhstan is a Muslim-majority country, albeit secular by constitution, the film makes nothing of this. Perhaps the producers felt these antagonists lacked sufficient audience recognition and impact without linkage to the number one American bogeyman of the era.<sup>41</sup> *Black Hawk Down* (2001), loosely based on real events, is set in Somalia during the 1992–1993 civil war when American-led UN Peacekeepers were assigned to keep order. The depiction of Islam is clichéd, with an aerial shot of a minaret as the faithful are called to prayer, then weaponized, as a man bowed down on a beach rises to shoulder his firearm. Thus, Islamic imagery and observance are again the province of militant fanatics (cf. Mingant 174). The film acknowledges the presence of UN troops from Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country, yet leaves their contribution vague, with the implication that they are not equal to the Americans.

It is argued that the post-9/11 climate generated a more heterogeneous mix of films, which attempted to redress the previous imbalance of Muslim representation, offering greater complexity (cf. Ramji 16; Mingant 168).<sup>42</sup> Mingant identifies a tendency to give Middle Eastern characters ‘a new power over language, word, and action’ (179). For instance, *Syriana* (2005) is cited for its relatively nuanced depiction of Muslims, not least in terms of ethnic and national diversity (cf. Ramji 10). A young Pakistani immigrant in an unnamed Arab country is faced with language barriers, unemployment, and police brutality, finding refuge in an Islamic school that offers sustenance for both mind and body. Most of the non-English dialogue is subtitled, still a rarity at this time. Complexity need not of

<sup>41</sup> The Russian terrorist leader refers to the American mass murder of Iraqis for cheaper oil.

<sup>42</sup> Even *United 93* (2006), which reconstructs one of the 9/11 hijacks, hints at intragroup tensions and disagreements among the terrorists. That said, stereotypes still proliferate (cf. Ramji 16). *Act of Valor* (2012) has terrorists detonate a bomb in an ice-cream van, surrounded by children. In *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* (2016), the only visually prominent Iraqi is an insurgent framed in prolonged close-up as he is stabbed in the neck by Lynn, his head inverted in the frame and haloed by his blood. *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* (2018) grafts anti-Muslim tropes onto an unrelated narrative of people-smuggling on the United States-Mexico border, with prayer rugs, darker skins, and the Arabic language linked to an assault on white America. The Swedish television series *Kalifat/Caliphate* (2020) replays the argument that young Muslims cut off from their roots and/or alienated from their environment, whether community or family, are especially susceptible to radicalization.

course equate with subtlety, depth, or a radical revision of Muslim representation to counter decades of ingrained negative stereotyping. Mingant argues that *Syriana* highlights similarity as much as difference between American and Middle Eastern characters (185). While these parallels are present, the film also deploys familiar anti-Muslim tropes. The Islamic school has an agenda of anti-West, antiliberal, and anti-Christian indoctrination, not to mention a cache of stolen American weapons. The call to prayer is heard over images of an American agent's tortured, mutilated body. The Pakistani youth, recruited by the school's leader, records a martyrdom video before participating in a suicide bombing. In *Rendition* (2007), Anwar (Omar Metwally) is an Egyptian chemical engineer long resident in America and married to a white American woman. Westernized and to a degree Americanized, though not a citizen, he is abducted, stripped, shackled, and tortured on the order of a senior CIA operative. While the film stresses the harshness and injustice of this treatment, Anwar's predicament is sidelined in favour of depicting the emotional toll exacted on his supportive wife<sup>43</sup> and the soul-searching of a conscience-stricken CIA officer. The film also equivocates over exonerating Anwar—who has the expertise to make a bomb and confesses, under duress, to contact with a known terrorist—while the key evidence against him, an incriminating mobile phone, remains unresolved.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012) employs a flashback structure to depict how Changez Khan (Riz Ahmed), a Pakistan-born New York financial analyst, becomes a CIA suspect in a terrorist kidnapping back home. A Princeton graduate, Khan subscribes to the American doctrine of equal opportunity, seeking the high professional and social status he believes his parents are now denied in Pakistan. Detached from his cultural and religious roots, he appears to be losing his sense of identity, rather than becoming a 'true' American. Disoriented by television coverage of the 9/11 attacks,<sup>44</sup> Khan responds less with anger or sorrow than a sense of awe at the terrorists' audacity, putting himself at odds with the groundswell of American public feeling. Despite this reaction, he claims that he couldn't choose a side after 9/11: the decision was made for him via

<sup>43</sup> A match cut depicts both of them enveloped in shadow, suggesting that her mental suffering is on a par with his torment.

<sup>44</sup> Conveyed through a series of jump cuts.

government-sanctioned intimidation and humiliation (an airport strip search,<sup>45</sup> an FBI interrogation), alongside regular verbal abuse. The film raises various strands of moral, political, and ideological complexity. As a university lecturer in Pakistan, Khan teaches his students that violent revolution may be viewed as an acceptable form of social change, with the caveat that analysis and debate are not synonymous with endorsement, propaganda, or indoctrination, whatever the CIA may believe. These concepts gain little traction, with Khan stating that America and Pakistan both follow forms of fundamentalism, in business and politics, treading a path of amoral reductivism that wrecks innocent lives. His own stance seems precariously balanced between (every)man of conscience and CIA stooge.

*Body of Lies* (2008) contrasts the tactics of CIA agent Roger Ferris and Jordanian security chief Hani Salaam (Mark Strong) as they pursue terrorist leader Al-Saleem. As the film's title suggests, Ferris is not concerned with strict veracity, making empty promises of protection for informers. Hani insists that their working relationship, and tentative friendship, must be based on truth. Placed centre-frame in sharp close-up, with Ferris positioned on the side, out of focus, Hani has a visual dominance to underline his laying down of terms. Where Hani recruits a jihadist as an informant, claiming it will make him a good Muslim, Ferris frames an innocent man, to draw Al-Saleem, and gets him killed. Hani disowns Ferris as a liar who violated their friendship yet also spares the latter a painful death, emerging from the light to rescue the captive CIA man from figurative and literal darkness. Adopting a pragmatic, even Machiavellian approach to combat terrorism, Hani succeeds where the CIA, with all its resources, could not, capturing Al-Saleem through his inside man. While Ferris is fluent in Arabic and affects a knowledge of the Qur'an, his ignorance of the local Muslim culture leaves him both adrift and a liability in the Islamic world, refracting the wider failings of American foreign policy.

Moustafa Bayoumi identifies a cycle of films, including *The Siege* (1998), *The Kingdom* (2007), and *Traitor* (2008), which focus on Black American-Arab understanding and friendship, with a clear implication that the former 'know better than whites how to talk to Arabs' (117).<sup>46</sup> Bayoumi links this trope with a Black tradition of seeking transformative antiracist,

<sup>45</sup> Lest the point be lost on the viewer, a medium close-up of the naked Khan merges with a dust cloud formed by one of the collapsed Twin Towers.

<sup>46</sup> *Three Kings* also plays on this idea, with a Black American praying alongside the Muslim faithful, albeit to Jesus—a Prophet in Muslim doctrine—rather than to Allah.

anti-imperialist alliance with Arab and Muslim regions (123). I suggest it facilitates another agenda. The Black American serves as a mediator between his white seniors and the Arab-Muslim ally; the latter thus observes the American-decreed agenda without being fully incorporated into the team or recognized as an equal. Any appreciation of their abilities is depicted as the personal response of a figure whose own minority status is rarely elided, even if not explicitly problematic.

In *The Siege*, Tony Shalhoub, a Lebanese-American actor, plays Frank Haddad, a New York-based FBI agent partnered with Anthony Hubbard (Denzel Washington). Depicted as a dedicated professional, Haddad deploys both logic and instinct. He is also humanized, or rather Americanized, employing local colloquialisms, playing football, and displaying a keen sense of humour.<sup>47</sup> His family life is depicted as warm and affectionate and includes attendance at a religious service, alongside Hubbard and other colleagues. Fluent in Arabic, Haddad serves as Hubbard's translator, often in high-risk situations. He advocates a hard line with suspected Arab terrorists<sup>48</sup> and, more contentiously, seems dismissive of American civil liberties laws. Haddad elbows a Palestinian suspect in the face and is reprimanded by Hubbard, the film's unwavering embodiment of American fair play. Haddad's perspective is challenged after terrorist attacks in New York prompt the declaration of martial law and the internment of Arab Americans, including his teenage son. Referring to himself as an FBI 'sand nigger', he quits on the grounds that his 20-year American citizenship and ten years with the Bureau count for nothing in the new political climate. Haddad and his family are no longer Americans, rather Arabs in America and therefore both automatically suspect and disqualified from basic human rights. For all the rote melodrama of these scenes, and the tokenistic resolution,<sup>49</sup> the point is made that Arab Americans, whatever their religion, have no effective public voice.

<sup>47</sup> In terms of costuming, Haddad wears a blue shirt, which carries warmer, less formal connotations than white. Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg argue that the Westernized Haddad has minimal association with Islam, in contrast to the terrorist leader, which tends to endorse the supposed link between Muslims and religiously inflected violence (62).

<sup>48</sup> Haddad states that this is the way things are done in his (unnamed) home country, so therefore neither originating in nor intrinsic to United States law enforcement practices.

<sup>49</sup> Hubbard brings Haddad back into the FBI fold and their renewed bond is affirmed as they jointly gun down their terrorist enemy. The mistreatment of Arab Americans, Haddad's family included, is attributed to a rogue general, downplaying any wider culpability, not least in regard to institutional attitudes.

*The Kingdom* features a Saudi Arabian police officer, Colonel Faris Al Ghazi, played by Arab-Israeli actor Ashraf Barhom. After a terrorist attack on an American oil compound, Faris is obliged to work with an FBI team, led by Ronald Fleury (Jamie Foxx). Shown as a humane man, who protests a brutal interrogation, Faris acknowledges local problems but will not accept criticism from patronizing American agents. Both sides are depicted as plagued by internal dissent and interdepartmental conflicts which hamper the fight against a common enemy. Depicted in his domestic environment, Faris is a good husband, father, and son, and also a devout Muslim, leading his family in prayer. Faris gradually bonds with Fleury, their growing empathy affirmed with a series of prolonged close-ups and an image of the men firing their weapons in unison during a rescue operation.<sup>50</sup> When Faris is cut down in the line of duty, another exchange of intense close-ups shows Fleury holding his dying colleague, and declared friend, assuring him that their mission was a success. Faris has proved his worth, with the ultimate sacrifice, yet only Fleury bears testament to the fallen officer and the film makes it clear that the terrorist threat will inevitably persist for generations to come.

*Traitor* conflates these two figures in the form of Samir Horn (Don Cheadle), a Sudanese-American. Formerly with the United States Army Special Forces, Horn now operates as a freelance arms dealer, first seen offering explosive to Yemeni terrorists. Visually associated with confinement and shadow, he is regarded by American intelligence as an opportunist rather than a fanatic, and not trusted by any side, his darker skin contrasted with both Arabs and white American agents. In jail, he is mocked by fellow prisoners for his Muslim stoicism and observance, as when he shares his food with a stranger. It is implied that this behaviour is merely a strategy to gain the trust of an incarcerated fundamentalist leader,<sup>51</sup> yet the film has already hinted otherwise. A 1978 prologue shows the young Samir's Muslim observance, in terms of prayer and Qur'anic study, just as his life is shattered by the car bomb that kills his father. This scene subverts the Euro-American practice of equating Islam with

<sup>50</sup> Fluent in English, Faris has visited the United States, training at Quantico, and enjoys American sports and television shows. Thus, Fleury is not required to gain any understanding of his new friend's language, culture, or traditions.

<sup>51</sup> The film's visual motifs include a chess board, a conventional means of denoting schemes and agendas as yet not fully revealed.

terrorism, the latter instead depicted as an assault and outrage upon the former.<sup>52</sup>

Horn is revealed to be a deep-cover American agent who reports to an older white man.<sup>53</sup> Isolated in the frame, he expresses guilt over a covert operation that resulted in unplanned casualties. A low-angle close-up depicts the angst-ridden Horn seeking consolation and reassurance in his faith, eyes closed, hands raised in prayer. This focus on a devout Muslim, who serves as a willing agent for international security despite great personal cost, physically and mentally, is arguably unprecedented in Euro-American cinema. The film's penultimate scene is a somewhat perfunctory encounter with a white FBI man, whose exchange of Qur'anic quotes with Horn—related to the taking and saving of innocent lives—appears to offer a racially inflected establishment endorsement of the latter's choices.<sup>54</sup> The problematic aspects of this scene are visually overwritten by the film's final shot. The relocated Horn is once more at prayer, his face tightly focused in medium close-up. Samir's head rises to be bathed in sunlight, connoting at least a momentary sense of peace, harmony, and clarity informed by his Muslim faith and identity.

More recently, a series of films depicting post-9/11 American operations in Iraq and Afghanistan refracts a wariness towards Muslims where the development of mutual trust is possible but problematic and usually fleeting. The British-produced *Battle for Haditha* (2007) is perhaps an anomalous outlier to the cycle in its depiction of an actual incident in 2005 Iraq. Employing a nonprofessional cast of former American servicemen and Iraqi civilians, the film centres on the planning, execution, and aftermath of an IED attack on an American convoy. *Battle for Haditha* aims to humanize all parties, even those involved in terrorist acts or military atrocities. Locals try to maintain a semblance of normal life, aware that Al Qaida-led insurgency is worsening the situation. There is tension between combat-weary home-grown fighters and more zealous foreign recruits, with the former being paid to undertake missions. Fatigued American ground troops regard any Iraqi as a potential enemy, not

<sup>52</sup> Horn later asserts that the real traitors are the traitors to Islam, a loaded statement that seems to be applied specifically to his current predicament.

<sup>53</sup> The latter views their mission—as a war to be won at all costs, with pawns sacrificed where necessary—in terms not dissimilar to those of Horn's main terrorist contact.

<sup>54</sup> The agent's line 'You're a hero, Samir' can be read as an empty valorisation, directed at a man who will not simplify or sanitize his actions in these Americanized, or Hollywoodized, terms.

realizing that the DVD seller who banters with them in English is an insurgent. Caught between Al Qaida and the Americans, noncombatants face being killed as either collaborators or traitors. Post IED attack, the resulting panic, fear, and anger trigger lethal retaliation in almost any direction. As the film makes clear, American slaughter of innocent Iraqis serves Al Qaida's interests in the propaganda war.

*Green Zone* (2010), set in 2003 Bagdad, is concerned with the search for Weapons of Mass Destruction, with an emphasis on flawed American intelligence, interdepartmental conflicts, coverups, and political and media pressures. The key Iraqi character is Freddy (Khalid Abdalla),<sup>55</sup> who warns American troops of a Sunni Ba'athist plot involving General Al Rawi, an associate of Saddam Hussein. Pinned down by a wary soldier, Freddy's agitated manner refracts the film's overall visual design (unstable framing and rapid edits). Embedded in this volatile environment, he is at least in tune with what is happening at ground level. A veteran of the 1987 Iran-Iraq war, which impaired his body but not his will,<sup>56</sup> Freddy is established as a voice of experience and authority. He points out American ignorance, irrationality, and misuse of resources to protagonist Roy Miller, an Army Chief Warrant Officer. Aware that Americans distrust him, Freddy will not be reduced to a Middle East cliché and stands up to Miller's brusque treatment. Uninterested in financial incentives, he is concerned with the people and future of his country, pursuing an agenda that Miller does not comprehend. Freddy clashes with Miller over Al Rawi, who is an asset to the American but a power-hungry traitor to the Iraqi. Freddy's viewpoint prevails when he kills Al Rawi, which effectively terminates Miller's covert mission. Placed centre-frame, Freddy assumes visual and narrative dominance as he informs Miller 'It is not for you to decide what happens here'.<sup>57</sup> While this statement may appear simplistic, given the geopolitical complexities in play, it underlines Freddy's perspective: whatever Miller's intentions, his actions serve the interests of America, not those of Iraq.

*Lone Survivor* (2013) is based on a real-life Navy SEAL mission in Afghanistan. The target, a Taliban leader, is depicted with a montage of

<sup>55</sup> Freddy gives his birth name as Farid Youssef Abdul Rahman. The film's credits list him only as Freddy.

<sup>56</sup> Freddy has a prosthetic leg.

<sup>57</sup> This stance is taken up in *Mosul* (2020), where a Nineveh SWAT team hunt down ISIS forces in the title city. Drawing on conventions of the patrol film, *Mosul* highlights issues of national identity and legitimacy; the low-key ending suggests that the long process of reconstruction and reconciliation begins at the level of immediate family.

decapitation, spurting blood, and frenzied faces. The film is notable for an extended sequence where the wounded protagonist, Marcus Luttrell, is rescued from Taliban troops by Pashtun villagers.<sup>58</sup> At huge personal risk, they save Luttrell from beheading—evoking the earlier scene—and resist a massed Taliban attack. This thematic and visual emphasis on a brave but near-helpless Westerner finding deliverance at the hands of Afghan strangers is uncommon in American cinema. While the villagers have conversations, the Pashto dialogue is not subtitled, leaving their reasons for helping Luttrell unclear within the film's diegesis. A caption presaging the end credits explains that the villagers were abiding by Pashtunwali, a 2000-year-old code of honour whereby an individual must be protected from their enemies at all costs. What the film does not mention is that Pashtuns are Muslims and would also be abiding by Islamic codes of sanctuary. The reasons for this omission must remain a matter of speculation. It is possible the filmmakers felt that any invocation of Islam unsettling established stereotypes would complicate or compromise the film's reception, not least in terms of its box-office performance. Whatever the case, depicting Muslims as selfless and courageous figures who save the American hero's life appears to have been an insurmountable issue.

The most commercially successful of these films is *American Sniper* (2014),<sup>59</sup> though this biopic of Chris Kyle is atypical of the cycle on various levels. Set in Iraq, during Kyle's four tours of duty, the focus is largely on his mental state as he eliminates Iraqi men, women, and children who seek to kill American troops. Close shots and flashbacks connote a man troubled by what he does, yet also aware of his responsibility to brother soldiers. Kyle's stoic devotion to duty is contrasted with the sadism of an insurgent leader, whose torture of an innocent boy causes the American great distress. While not all Iraqis are depicted as threats, the civilians are regarded as a liability for not following American dictates rather than as people in need of protection. *Sand Castle* (2017), set in 2003 Iraq, humanizes some of its Muslim characters, suggesting lives beyond the immediate conflict, and challenges the default American suspicion of locals. The film also stresses that any Iraqi who helps American troops is risking their life, graphically illustrated by the burnt corpse of a school

<sup>58</sup> One of the men, Mohammad Gulab, literally offers Luttrell a helping hand, and he requires support to walk even a short distance.

<sup>59</sup> The film achieved a worldwide gross of over \$547 million on a budget of \$59 million (source: [www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt2179136/?ref=bo\\_se\\_r\\_1](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt2179136/?ref=bo_se_r_1)).



principal. *12 Strong* (2018) places American troops in uneasy coalition with an Afghan warlord in a post-9/11 counterstrike against Taliban forces. While friendship is possible on an individual level, the warlord stresses that America is just another tribe in his country, an ally one day, an enemy the next.

As *Battle for Haditha* indicates, British-produced films have tended to follow different routes in the depiction of Muslims, likely due to a combination of historical, sociocultural, industrial, and economic factors. In Britain, Muslim settler communities can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, though British Muslims' social behaviour and sense of self have probably been determined as much by community, ethnic, familial, and cultural factors as by ideas of Islamic identity (cf. Ansari 24–5; Kabir 56, 17). Discussing the late 1980s and early 1990s, Humayun Ansari contends that essential notions of Britishness, steeped in nostalgia, continued to be perceived as homogenous, Christian, white, and rooted in past centuries (1), with minimal space or tolerance for nonconforming aspects. The 1990s also witnessed a heightened hostility to British Muslims in the context of the Salman Rushdie fatwa and the Gulf War, which slowly eased off until reignited by 9/11 (cf. Ansari 338, 339). Even before this seismic event, progress for British Muslims at the turn of the millennium seemed minimal (cf. Ansari 391). The majority were still largely ghettoized, inhabiting diaspora communities forged along ethnic lines, physically segregated from the majority white population (cf. Ansari 391).

As Ramji notes, post-1980 British films with prominent Muslim characters are often concerned with issues of personal and community identity (5). *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), set in a Thatcherite Britain of amoral entrepreneurialism, features Omar, a young Anglo-Pakistani man, negotiating his sense of self on various levels, not least in terms of sexuality. While Omar is implicitly Muslim, the film barely touches on religion,<sup>60</sup> other than his capitalist uncle dismissing it as harmful to Pakistan's progress and generally incompatible with making money. *My Son the Fanatic* (1997), located in an unnamed Midlands town, *East is East* (1999), based in Salford, and the Glasgow-set *Ae Fond Kiss* (2004) address the 1990s growth of generation-gap tensions in Muslim communities (cf. Ansari 217). As Ansari observes, most young Muslims attempt to broker several sets of expectations in terms of home, community, mainstream British culture, and the mass media (218). *My Son the Fanatic* concerns a Pakistani

<sup>60</sup> Islam is not mentioned by name.

taxi driver, Parvez, whose son, Farid, is engaged to a white woman, the daughter of a senior police officer. Inhabiting the social margins, Parvez has faced a lifetime of racialized rejection and exclusion.<sup>61</sup> Farid, though offered the chance of greater integration via marriage, is moving towards radical Islam and rejecting British values and conventions. Parvez has adopted Western traits, including whisky and jazz, while his son eschews cultural mix, looking to Islam for tradition, belief, and purity. Their growing estrangement<sup>62</sup> is part of a wider schism sited at the local mosque, where idealistic and confrontational youth clash with their more placid elders. As the frame fills with angry young British-Asian faces, exclusively male,<sup>63</sup> the father-son conflict turns physical; any chance of reconciliation heads into the distance alongside Farid and his new brothers-in-arms.

*East is East* is set in the early 1970s, though the issues explored relate just as readily to the late 1990s: religious observance, sexuality, relationships, and the realities of life in a multi-cultural inner-city district. Pakistani immigrant Zahir regards himself as a good Muslim, yet his traditionalist views put him at odds with his English wife and their Anglicized children. While Zahir cites Islam as a religion of equality and community, *East is East* highlights such contentious issues as arranged marriage, forced mosque attendance, compulsory circumcision, and corrosive ideas of status and honour. Despite the largely humorous tone, the controlling, physically violent Zahir seems a greater threat to his family than the external prejudices emblemized by politician Enoch Powell and his pro-repatriation agenda. *Ae Fond Kiss* continues this debate while also refracting the Western essentialization and demonization of Islam, here linked to an aggressive, if minority white racism. The focal interracial romance, between a Muslim man and a Catholic woman, incurs obstacles and intolerance from various factions. While the couple prove resistant to familial, social, and religious pressures, the upbeat conclusion offers little more substance than their drunken holiday toast to both Jesus and Muhammad.

The London terrorist bombings of July 7, 2005, form the backdrop for *London River* (2009), which depicts how generational divides are not confined to any particular religion or culture. In the aftermath of the attacks,

<sup>61</sup> In a nightclub scene, racist remarks directed at Parvez are couched in terms of 'good-natured' humour.

<sup>62</sup> Underlined by Farid's marginal presence for much of the film.

<sup>63</sup> Despite their polarized viewpoints, neither Parvez nor Farid have much regard or concern for the women in their community.

Ousmane, an African Muslim, and Elisabeth, a white English Christian, search for their absent adult children, who turn out to be romantically involved. Elisabeth, widowed by an earlier conflict,<sup>64</sup> is wary of the Muslim neighbourhood where her daughter lives, though the first men she speaks to are polite, courteous, and helpful. Ousmane fears that his son, a virtual stranger to him,<sup>65</sup> could have become politicized and perhaps even involved with the bombings. Elisabeth's hostility to Muslims in general and Ousmane in particular stems partly from anxiety that her daughter may have been converted to Islam, with the implication of coercion. As the parents tentatively bond through a common humanity, and a pervasive fear for their offspring, Elisabeth accepts that she knew and understood her daughter no more than Ousmane could relate to his son. The film's opening juxtaposition of Christian and Muslim religious observance suggests that Elisabeth and Ousmane find at least a measure of solace in their respective faiths. However, the revelation of their children's joint fate as passengers on the targeted bus, devastating in itself, also means that the burial service required by Islamic custom will be denied to them.<sup>66</sup>

The satirical comedy *Four Lions* (2010) centres on a group of Manchester-based suicide bombers.<sup>67</sup> Opposed to Western imperialism and materialism, they are nevertheless products of a society and ideology they profess to despise, not least in their cultural reference points.<sup>68</sup> Within the group there is an ethno-generational clash, as the younger men, of Pakistani heritage, argue with an older white man,<sup>69</sup> who exhibits paranoid delusions. A sequence in a Pakistan training camp addresses the distinction between soldier and sociopath and also illustrates the national, cultural, and linguistic divisions that afflict the supposedly united brethren. *Four Lions* shares certain traits with the Palestinian drama *Paradise Now* (2005), which contextualizes and humanizes the perpetrators of a terrorist attack in Israel. Here, retaliation is determined and defined by the economic hardships and daily degradations of living in an occupied territory built on

<sup>64</sup> The British-Argentine Falklands War of 1982.

<sup>65</sup> Ousmane readily admits that he played no part in his son's upbringing.

<sup>66</sup> While the film eschews graphic detail, it is intimated that there was virtually nothing left of the victims.

<sup>67</sup> One of whom appears to be mentally impaired.

<sup>68</sup> As when the leader, Omar, uses Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) to allegorize the bombing mission for his young son.

<sup>69</sup> There have been white British Muslim converts since the late nineteenth century (cf. Ansari 14).

an ideology of Palestinian inequality and inferiority.<sup>70</sup> In *Four Lions* there is comparatively little sense of how group leader Omar became radicalized and ready to both kill and die for his cause. *Paradise Now* also addresses the issue of indoctrination, where Allah's name is invoked to validate human choices, and the cultural pressures to redeem lost family honour.<sup>71</sup> Both films explore the logistics, aesthetics, and language of martyrdom videos, with a similar emphasis on technical problems, retakes, and off-message shopping advice. In each instance, the absurdity of the process underlines the ideological, political, and spiritual vacuity inherent to these homemade testaments in particular and to fundamentalist culture in general.

### THE HERO FIGURE

Any attempt to define the term 'hero' must inevitably be partial, limited, culturally informed, geopolitically grounded, and linguistically modulated. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) is cited as an influential work on comparative mythology, albeit more in terms of popular success than scholarly rigour.<sup>72</sup> The hero is linked to a rites of passage formula—separation, initiation, and return—which forms the basis for Campbell's concept of the monomyth (30).<sup>73</sup> The hero's ultimate achievement is the realization of 'unity in multiplicity', a gift he offers to all humankind (40). While Campbell references Islam, Muhammad, and *The 1001 Nights*, the essentialist nature of his approach to the hero figure, couched in psychoanalytic terms (cf. Rensma 106–7), is of limited application for the purposes of this book. I will explore a more general set of criteria originating in Euro-American concepts. Simon Williams, discussing what he terms the epic hero, identifies a number of key aspects.

<sup>70</sup>The more recent Egyptian film, *Arrest Letter/Detention Letter* (2017), takes a pseudo-psychological approach, with its terrorist leader driven by childhood trauma, class prejudice, and female rejection.

<sup>71</sup>There is furthermore the suggestion that martyrdom serves the Israeli cause in the long run, making life even harder for the Palestinians left behind.

<sup>72</sup>Campbell's methodology has been criticized for, among other things, a loss of particularity and distinctiveness, a disregard for cultural holism and, in his later work, a tendency to equate the Oriental with the primitive (cf. Manganaro 165, 166, 176).

<sup>73</sup>To paraphrase Campbell: a hero leaves the everyday world for a supernatural realm; having won a decisive victory, he returns with the power to grant boons to his fellow man (30).

Embodying the most admirable human traits, a hero possesses an extraordinary level of strength, energy, and courage coupled with great ambition, a clear sense of their goals, and a fearless approach to achieving them (S. Williams 1, 15). Though not perfect, they offer transient glimpses of human perfection, often with a religious or divine inflection (1). However, their exceptional abilities, such as fighting prowess, stem from innate human strength, rather than supernatural powers or divine intervention (15).<sup>74</sup> A hero, whatever their potential or achievement, is not necessarily moral or virtuous, especially if accompanied by a presumption or assertion of authority and/or superiority (1). Thus, any hero who acknowledges or lays claim to a heroic status is automatically problematic or suspect (1). A chivalrous hero dedicates their services to causes and beliefs beyond themselves, often championing social ideals and norms, while remaining semi or wholly detached from the wider society (S. Williams 15, 16; cf. D.A. Miller 163–4).

John W. Roberts, discussing the Black folk hero, argues that the hero figure should not be regarded or treated as a universal type, any more than heroism is a standardized and acknowledged behavioural category (1; cf. D.A. Miller 1). In reality, these qualities are largely determined by historic and sociocultural factors, with figures and actions deemed heroic in one context being viewed as unexceptional, questionable, or even criminal in another. A hero may thus be defined as someone attributed with valued traits and actions, usually masculinized, ‘that exemplify our conception of our ideal self’, in terms of individual and collective history, perceived social needs and goals, and present realities (Roberts 1, 2–3). In cinematic terms, Richard Dyer states that hero figures are associated with centrality, the embodiment of values, and self-sacrifice (2002: 75). These qualities are sometimes linked with concepts of bodily perfection, which may also be invested with a sensuality or sexuality (2002: 118).

Additional criteria must be invoked to signify a heroic protagonist as Muslim. It may be argued that this status is not achievable, or even conceivable, within the confines of Euro-American popular culture. Sophia Rose Arjana notes how Muslim men, in particular, are systematically dehumanized, stripped figuratively (of legal rights) and literally (as prisoners), and excommunicated from the human community (3, 4). While

<sup>74</sup>There are notable exceptions to this qualification, including Heracles/Hercules and Siegfried.

this stance may appear extreme, it invokes real-life instances that have been repeated numerous times, with the Abu Ghraib scandal being one notorious example. Arjana admits the existence of 'positive and even romantic treatments of Muslims', such as Saladin (see Chap. 5), yet dismisses them as trivial in the context of the 'overwhelmingly negative' Western narrative about Islam (8). Obviously, I take a different view and would point to scholarship on the Muslim superheroes found in comic books and animated television shows. A. David Lewis and Martin Lund state that the Islamic prefix inscribes these characters 'with one or several markers meant to signify a "Muslim" identity, based in one conception of Islam or another' (3). Within this context, the perceived authenticity of the various heroes or models of Islam is not the main concern. The very use of the term acknowledges that the creative talents involved, Muslim and non-Muslim, and also their critics, have these characters 'produce, reproduce, represent, and embody one or more of a host of discursively constructed conceptions of Islam and Muslimness' (3). I will return to this argument in relation to filmic representation in the chapters that follow.

Hussein Rashid acknowledges a long and diverse history of what the idea of the hero means to Muslims, resulting in a plurality of heroic models (231). In general terms he argues that Islamic conceptions of a hero will include correct behaviour and an ethical worldview, alongside combative actions; in being responsible to these divinely inspired ideals, the true Muslim draws themselves closer to God (211).<sup>75</sup> Individual achievement must be integrated with a moral impetus, as the connection between action and intent is central to Muslim thought (214). Rashid cites John Renard's description of a Muslim hero as a behavioural exemplar or role model as realized in a context of adversity (214). Furthermore, rather than being self-achieved or self-made, a hero 'is called by God, and has God-given abilities', which will be used by the former through free will and in unique ways (214–5). Neither invincible nor immortal, the Muslim hero, though subject to human frailty, embodies an optimal, extraordinary realization of human abilities (215). Perhaps inevitably, there is both variance from and similarity to the concepts discussed by Simon Williams. In terms of the criteria for selecting my case studies, I have focused on films where

<sup>75</sup> From Muslim perspectives, faith and justice may have an interdependent relationship where justice is a manifestation of faith, and faith is cultivated in justice (cf. Rashid 215).

the heroic protagonist derives, however distantly, from Islamic history or folklore, is located in or associated with an Islamic region, and is signified, explicitly or otherwise, as a Muslim. Put another way, notions of an Islamic milieu and a Muslim identity are integral to the depiction and appreciation of these characters and their actions.

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